

RAC Unalakleet Field Tour

Meeting Minutes and Trip Report

July 29-31, 2004



Thursday, July 29, 2004

RAC participants:

Randy Frank
Gary “Gus” Gustafson
Sandra Key
Susan Olsen
Jim Posey
Larry Taylor

BLM participants:

Henri Bisson, State Director
June Bailey, Anchorage Field Office
Ramone McCoy, Glennallen Field Office
Bob Schneider, Northern Field Office
Colleen McCarthy, Energy & Solid Minerals
Jody Weil, External Affairs
Teresa McPherson, External Affairs

All participants departed Ted Stevens International Airport via Hageland Aviation charter at 11 a.m. The group arrived in Unalakleet shortly before 1 p.m. After a brief walk around the village, participants met at the Unalakleet School multi-purpose room.

Art Ivanoff, Native Village of Unalakleet, called the meeting to order at 1:35 p.m.

Meeting participants introduced themselves. Unalakleet participants included village board members, elders, other village leaders, educators and residents.

Ivanoff invited BLM State Director Henri Bisson to address the group.

Bisson thanked everyone for attending the meeting. He said BLM is committed to strengthening our relationships with rural communities. Bisson explained what the Resource Advisory Council was and their purpose in visiting Unalakleet. He said BLM and the RAC were “here to listen to what you have to say.”

Ivanoff then led a discussion on several issues important to the village.

- Ivanoff discussed a resolution passed by the Native Village of Unalakleet regarding BLM activities on the river system. The resolution asked that BLM coordinate more closely with the village when BLM personnel come out to do field work.

Ivanoff explained that when residents see BLM personnel or helicopters, they ask the board the purpose. He said as part of good government-to-government consultation, it's important that the board be informed by BLM when personnel arrive. Another resident added that the village is the "door" to the river system, and it's important to "knock on that door when you arrive in the village."

Henri Bisson said BLM would look into establishing a formal coordination agreement with the village similar to the one BLM has with the village of Barrow.

- Some residents were concerned about the Ryan cabin on the Unalakleet River, and hoped Bisson would help resolve the issue. Bisson said getting a five-year permit in place to establish a continuing tie is a good first step. Residents were concerned about permit fees; Bisson said BLM would work with them on this issue.
- Residents also expressed concerns about hazardous materials at a former military site (White Alice site) where residents use an easement. Bisson said BLM would look into the easement and hopefully present some solutions by spring.
- Other residents were concerned about poorly marked easements, and explained that hunters and others use Native corporation lands to access BLM land. They hoped BLM could either properly mark easements or relinquish them.
- Some residents were interested in forming an emergency firefighting (EFF) crew and said Unalakleet had an EFF crew some years earlier. Bisson said he would have BLM's Alaska Fire Service contact the village during spring recruitment.
- Many residents were concerned about salmon stocks, and in particular, mortality rates from catch and release fishing. They asked BLM to work with other land managers to ensure sustainability of subsistence resources.

Bisson said he would be willing to engage the Federal Subsistence Board on this issue. He also encouraged residents to take up this issue with the Seward Peninsula subsistence council, and said the Anchorage Field Office subsistence specialist could work with the Unalakleet subsistence council member on this issue.

- Residents were also concerned about declining moose populations, and encouraged BLM to evaluate what is sustainable when issuing permits.
- One retired educator said there was a need for more educational programs and opportunities for village youth interested in careers in the natural sciences. He suggested BLM hire an intern from the village.
- Several residents expressed the need for cooperative management and the need for a long-term river management strategy. June Bailey said BLM plans to update the Unalakleet river management plan and would engage the village during that process. Bailey said she would be in touch with the village soon to set up the next meeting to follow up on these and other issues.

Residents commended June Bailey for working with the village on several issues and for coming out to meet with them on a regular basis. They also thanked Henri Bisson for attending the meeting and hearing their concerns, and for agreeing to address the Federal Subsistence Board on their behalf.

The meeting adjourned 3:45 p.m.

Following the meeting, BLM managers and RAC members traveled up the Unalakleet River by motorboats. The group overnighted at Maggie's Camp on the river approximately 18 miles from Unalakleet.

Friday, July 30, 2004

Ryan Cabin

Following breakfast in camp, the group traveled upriver to look at a group of structures known as Ryan Cabin on the north bank of the river within the wild river corridor.

A local resident named Frank Ryan applied for the lands as a trade and manufacturing site in 1958, but didn't understand the requirements and failed to finalize the claim. BLM issued a five-year renewable special use permit in 1997 so the family could remain at the site after Ryan's death. His family lived at the site until the late 1980's. The family notified BLM that they did not wish to renew the permit in 2002.

The site consists of the original cabin, three storage sheds, fish drying racks and one pit toilet. The family requested that BLM keep the cabin on site as a shelter for hunters in the area.

Mink Farm

The group then continued on upriver to the mink farm. The farm is a rare intact example of fur farms that operated in western Alaska in the early 20th century. The site includes a cabin, sawmill and two barns with mink cages. Many relics from the 30's and 40's still remain onsite and are in danger of theft, vandalism or damage from exposure.

BLM will complete a condition assessment and will outline work to be done in 2005. Portions of this project will be conducted under a partnership agreement with the Native Village of Unalakleet.

The group then returned to Maggie's Camp. After dinner in camp, BLM managers and RAC members had an informal group discussion. The previous day, the RAC asked former RAC chair Gary Gustafson to chair the discussion.

RAC informal meeting, 7 p.m.

Gustafson opened the meeting and outlined agenda items identified earlier:

- OHV subgroup resolution
- Letter from Western Arctic Caribou Herd Working Group
- National Petroleum Reserve-Alaska RMT subcommittee
- National Petroleum Reserve-Alaska activity plans

OHV subcommittee

Susan Olsen summarized her earlier memo to the RAC regarding OHV designations for the East Alaska Resource Management Plan. She said she had concerns with the range of alternatives presented, and felt that only the conservation alternative offered any opportunity for non-motorized recreation. She also said that not managing OHV use on state-selected lands did not meet BLM's mandates.

Ramone McCoy said a designation of "Limited" gives BLM management options. She explained that making designations for lands to be conveyed to the State represents challenges, that BLM is obligated to consider the concerns of the eventual landowner before setting designations during land use planning.

Henri Bisson stressed the need for a consistent strategy for interim management that the public can understand. He noted that designations can also affect access to mining claims.

Randy Frank encouraged BLM to ensure funding availability for managing OHV use before making designations, and said it's important to not make recommendations agencies can't fund.

McCoy said the East Alaska draft plan was now scheduled for December 2004, so the RAC could continue this discussion at their October meeting. McCoy said she would like to see a broader discussion by the full RAC before they entertain a resolution.

Gustafson thanked Olsen for researching the topic of OHV management under the East Alaska plan, and said the RAC would place this on their October agenda.

Western Arctic Caribou Herd Working Group

Gustafson asked Henri Bisson or Bob Schneider to address the recent letter from the chair of the Western Arctic Caribou Herd working group expressing dismay that BLM did not participate in the group's spring meeting. The letter also recommended that BLM hold scoping meetings in communities throughout the range of the Western Arctic Caribou Herd when BLM conducts planning for the southern portion of the petroleum reserve, and that BLM recognize the working group as a key stakeholder in management planning for the area.

Bob Schneider said he responded to the working group's letter and assured them they would be engaged when BLM begins planning for this portion of the petroleum reserve. Schneider said BLM will get the RAC a copy of the response.

National Petroleum Reserve-Alaska Research and Monitoring Team (RMT) Subcommittee

Sandra Key said she attended portions of the RMT's last meeting June 2. She said the group was focused and committed to working on a monitoring concept, but had concerns about funding for their work and about how they would ultimately fit into the North Slope Science Initiative.

Bob Schneider summarized the work the RMT did at the June 2 meeting. He explained the group developed a list of specific issues and indicators. Schneider then developed a matrix using this list, and various members of the RMT agreed to flesh out the matrix by developing the dependent and independent variables prior to the next meeting. The RMT set their next meeting for September 14, to be held in Fairbanks.

National Petroleum Reserve-Alaska activity planning

Henri Bisson provided a brief update of several plans:

- BLM will issue leases for the Northwest portion of the petroleum reserve in August. We anticipate a decision from the court by December on the motion filed by environmental groups earlier this year.
- BLM has received over 125,000 comments on the activity plan for the Northeast portion of the petroleum reserve. The majority of these are form letters recommending the "no action" alternative, but offer very little substantive comment. BLM may take the Teshekpuk area out of play for ten years. The public comment period was extended through Aug. 23.
- BLM will begin scoping in early 2005 for the south portion of the petroleum reserve. This may be the most controversial area within the National Petroleum Reserve-Alaska.
- The final plan for the Alpine satellite development will be out at the end of August, with an ROD by the end of Sept. BLM expects some heat over our decisions in this plan.

Call for non-agenda items

Sandra Key expressed concerns about the low attendance by RAC members this field tour. She said the field trip was put together at the request of the RAC and members had committed to this date, yet only six RAC members attended. She asked how members could ensure better attendance at future field tours, given the work and expense involved in providing the annual field tour. Gustafson suggested the RAC discuss this topic at the October meeting.

Ramone McCoy invited the RAC to hold a regular meeting at BLM's Glennallen Field Office now that the new facility was completed. The RAC agreed to discuss this when they set their 2005 schedule in October.

Several RAC members said they enjoyed meeting with local residents in Unalakleet, and appreciated that village board members had a prepared agenda for the meeting.

RAC members thanked June Bailey and her staff for hosting the annual field tour. They also thanked Gary Gustafson for chairing the meeting in the absence of the chair and vice chair.

The meeting concluded at 8:50 p.m.

The group again overnighted at Maggie's Camp on the river.

Saturday, July 31, 2004

Following breakfast in camp, the group packed and headed downriver for Unalakleet. They departed Unalakleet at 1 p.m. via Hageland Aviation charter.

Tour concluded upon arrival at Anchorage's Ted Stevens International Airport at 3 p.m.